Usage guidelines

Primary Initial Teacher Trainees' perceptions of and perspectives on the role of the Teaching Assistant in English primary contexts

Abstract

This article focuses on exploring initial teacher trainees' experiences of and perspectives on the role of the Teaching Assistant (TA) in mainstream primary contexts. A backdrop of shrinking school budgets coupled with a 'mainstream for all' political agenda are contributing to growing uncertainty about the role of TAs in education. This article presents the results of a small-scale empirical study, involving 75 initial teacher trainees at the University of Cambridge. Trainees' perspectives regarding the roles/responsibilities that TAs have been seen to undertake and perceptions regarding the impact of the TAs they worked with were ascertained, with the aim of exploring how well current ITT content prepares students for an effective teacher/TA working relationship. Concept modelling was used as an analysis tool, to present visual representations of these perceptions. Trainees emphasised the administrative, pedagogical and pastoral roles that TAs were perceived to undertake and specifically highlighted the perceived ability of TAs to support students displaying needs relating to social, emotional and mental health. The findings highlight that the vague nature of current ITT content in relation to the role of TAs continues to serve as a barrier to students building coherent and consistent understandings of the successful deployment of TAs in English primary contexts.

Introduction

The role of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in English educational contexts continues to be complex and ever-changing. The current political landscape has projected increasing uncertainty with regard to the future of the TA role within recent years. It has long been acknowledged that the role of TAs is difficult to define, with its multi-faceted nature, inter-relatability and role blurring with other teaching roles often argued to contribute to this difficulty (Gerschel, 2005). TAs working in English schools make up over a quarter of the current staff workforce; their prominence has significantly and consistently expanded in the last 20 years, to coincide with the emergence of the inclusion agenda (DFE, 2018). However, the numbers of TAs in state funded schools has begun to fluctuate over the last 3 years, seeing a decrease for the first time in 10 years between 2016 and 2017, from 265,600 in 2016 to 262,800. The reduction in the numbers of TAs is small as an overall percentage of the workforce, however, it perhaps indicates a trend of fluctuating employment opportunities for TAs. The problematic nature of managing shrinking school budgets is widely reported by Headteachers, even prior to the effects of the pandemic, and it is reasonable to link this with reduced numbers of TA-roles that schools can financially accommodate (Palikara et al., 2019).

If it is accepted that the role of TAs in English schools is somewhat uncertain, looking forward, then it is increasingly important to understand the ways in which the whole staff body of a school share responsibilities for meeting student needs as a community. Of particular interest, are the ways in which mainstream schools can continue to accommodate the current government's inclusion agenda, against a backdrop of reduced funding for support staff and a recruitment and retention crisis with regard to teachers. Consequently, the impetus

for this research is to understand more about the ways in which Initial Teacher Training (ITT) trainees perceive the role of the TA, their experiences of working with support staff, and the links between the role of the TA and their chosen role as teachers. It is hoped that the findings from this research will inform effective foci for taught and practical content on primary ITT programmes, by highlighting potential misconceptions and/or pockets of effective practice with regard to supporting effective working between ITT trainees and TAs. The research questions driving this small scale research project are set out below:

1. To understand the perceptions of ITT students with regard to the foci and efficacy of the TA role in state funded primary contexts; and, consequently:

2. To explore how fit for purpose current ITT content is in preparing students to build effective working relationships with TAs.

Current status of the role of TAs

In June 2019, the Department for Education (DFE) released a report detailing the findings from a research project that they had commissioned, the aim of which was to ascertain the TA deployment strategies employed by schools in England. The report highlighted the complexity of the TA role and perceived benefits of TAs, as shared by senior leaders. These benefits were linked to classroom management, reducing teacher workload, pupil progress, wraparound care and cost-efficiency. However, the use of the term 'perceived benefits,' in the DFE's report, suggests that the DFE may question the level of evidence provided by senior leaders to justify their perspectives. Despite the aforementioned perceived benefits, over half (38/60) of the interviewed senior leaders have/were planning to reduce the numbers of TAs employed in their schools. This is consistent with a range of other publications, highlighting the impact of funding constraints on staffing levels and training opportunities for staff in English schools (National Audit Office, 2016; Williams & Grayson, 2018).

This juxtaposition between perceived benefits of the TA role and continual reduction in employment opportunities for TAs is problematic, particularly for vulnerable children in the English education system. As it is widely acknowledged that TAs most frequently support children identified with SEND, it seems logical that reducing the numbers of TAs in our schools is likely to reduce the amount of support available to meet the needs of children identified with SEND. Indeed, Williams and Greyson (2018) found that "spending on teaching assistants improves outcomes for the least able, along with those who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)" (p.20). Therefore, ascertaining effective approaches to deploying TAs and sharing these with teachers at all stages of their career is vital in maximising the impact that TAs can have on pupils' experiences of learning.

Clearly there remains considerable uncertainty about what constitutes effective deployment of TAs and optimum staffing levels of TAs in English schools. Unfortunately, this uncertainty is compounded by and, indeed informed by, the wide acknowledgement that there is a lack of TA status across the UK education system (Burgess & Mayes, 2009). It is widely acknowledged that teachers in the UK education system experience lower status than many of their international peers; when this is extrapolated to TAs, this is increasingly problematic. The DFE themselves acknowledged, in their recent report, that there is a lack of value and respect in the sector for TAs, articulating that, "respondents reported feeling that TAs are generally undervalued in terms of the role they perform in the education sector" (2019, p.42). Limited funding means that pay for TAs remains low and limits opportunities for training and professional development.

One of the most significant contributing factors regarding the uncertainty about what constitutes effective deployment of TAs is the ongoing debate as to whether TAs' role is pedagogical. In order to explore this debate, it is first important to highlight the researcher's

distinction between 'pedagogy' and 'teaching.' Pedagogy, as defined by Alexander (2004), involves 'what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted' (p.11). Distinctly, teaching can be defined as, 'the act of using method x to enable pupil to learn y.' (ibid, p.12). Therefore, in order to undertake a pedagogical role, specific knowledge and skills are required to develop the capacity to make informed, responsible decisions about the teaching process. This is arguably a much higher-order skill than that of teaching, which most often involves informed implementation of a given strategy to support learning. It is clear that current DFE policy veers away from acknowledging TAs as undertaking a role linked to pedagogy, as they consistently use the word 'support' in their description of TAs' potential efficacy, and do not acknowledge the role has having pedagogical features (DFE, 2019). Indeed, the term 'teaching' is rarely mentioned by policy-makers in relation to TAs. However, other authors have acknowledged and, in some cases, championed TAs' potential to have a role linked to that of the pedagogical role associated with a teacher. Therefore, this 'role-blurring' between TAs and Teachers is likely to present a barrier for effective preparation of ITT students in building effective working relationships with TAs, due to the difficulty with articulating the point at which TAs' teaching role ends and Teachers' pedagogical role begins (Butt & Lowe, 2012).

Initial Teacher Training and the role of TAs

In January 2015, the Carter review of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) was published; an independent review into the quality and adequacy of current ITT provision in England. The report highlighted a range of areas for development, focusing primarily on the need for better quality school-based experiences in ITT, effective partnership working and developments in programme content (Mutton, Burn & Menter, 2017). However, the most relevant finding in

relation to the subject matter of this paper is that of the 'significant gaps' identified in ITT trainees' exposure to building knowledge in the area of SEND. Carter identified too much variability in the quality, amount and focus of SEND content in ITT programmes. This will necessarily relate to trainees' exposure to developing knowledge about the role of TAs, since TAs are universally acknowledged to possess a role inter-connected to the education of children identified with SEND. The Carter report makes only one mention of TAs: "Trainees should also be introduced to how to work with a range of colleagues (SENCos, teaching assistants) as well as parents and carers to support children with SEND" (p.35). Yet, as has been previously highlighted in this paper, 'how to work' with TAs is not yet adequately understood and is variable between schools and other educational providers. Therefore, supporting trainees to build effective relationships with TAs in ITT is not easily conceptualised. Indeed, the current framework of core content for ITT does not mention TAs (DFE, 2016a). The research conducted for this paper aims to unpack this 'how to work' direction by ascertaining a snapshot of current ITT trainees' perceptions on the role of TAs and, therefore, highlight areas for further consideration in designing effective ITT core content to support effective working relationships between TAs and Teachers. It is hoped that, although small-scale, this research may be able to highlight some 'fuzzy generalisations' that can support future policy shaping with regard to teacher training (Bassey, 1998).

Methodology

The ontological perspective that underpins this small-scale study is that of interpretivism and social constructivism; concerned with the influence of a learner's social context in his/her meaning making. Consequently this study employed a single case study design, enabling the researcher to explore participants' context-specific understandings with regard to the chosen phenomenon, within its real life environment (Yin, 2018). In this case, the researcher was

interested in exploring trainees' perceptions of the role of the TA, in the context of one university, linking with school-based experiences within one regional location.

This case study was conducted with ITT trainees on the Primary PGCE programme at the University of Cambridge, where the researcher is an honorarium lecturer. It is acknowledged that there are significant issues with generalisability when implementing a case study methodology. Yet, the work of Stake (2006) supports the researcher's chosen approach; Stake asserts that each case can be viewed as a 'bounded system,' in which a unique complex of interrelated elements or characteristics operate within identifiable boundaries. It is argued that the complexity of the role and responsibilities associated with the role of the TA requires initial small-scale investigation via such a 'bounded system.' The findings may then be applied to wider geographical contexts, in future research, with the aim of making generalisations that could inform national policy.

75 participants were sampled for involvement in this study; purposively sampled due to their being ITT trainees on the Primary PGCE programme at the University of Cambridge. Data were gathered during a series of three usual teaching sessions, which the researcher led as part of the 'Inclusion Day Conferences' at the University between February and March of 2019, the topic of which was exploring the role of TAs. 25 trainees were present at each of the three sessions and data were gathered over a one hour period within each of the taught sessions. All students had spent a minimum of 35 days on teaching placements across a minimum of 4 different primary schools by this point in their course. The placement schools reflect a variety of contrasting environments (rural, inner-city and urban) and all students had spent at least 1 week in an SEN-focused environment. All students had worked alongside TAs in multiple environments, enabling them to have formed initial opinions in relation to

the TA-role and the ITT student vs TA relationship; those initial opinions were the focus of this research.

The methods employed followed a three-stage process. This process is depicted in figure one.

[Figure 1 here].

In stage one, a variation of concept mapping was undertaken in order to access 'the bare bones of language' with regard to participants' perceptions on the phenomenon of interest. Hay et al. (2008) articulate that concept mapping allows the researcher to identify participants' existing knowledge and support linkage to create new knowledge via 'concept labels that identify specific ideas (concepts) and the links between them, which explain how concepts are related to make meaning' (p.302). Participants were asked to write words and/or phrases on sticky notes, separated on their tables, in response to the following two researcher-devised prompts, which linked to the research questions driving this study:

1. Identify the roles/responsibilities that you have seen TAs undertake, or that you are aware of TAs undertaking in schools.
2. Articulate your perceptions on the impact of the role of TAs, with regard to pupil outcomes and school effectiveness.

Participants were given 10 minutes to discuss/respond to the prompts above, in small groups/pairs, before stage two of the research was undertaken. In this stage, 'research conversations' were undertaken with the groups of 25 trainees, in each group; trainees were invited to talk around the words and/or phrases that they had written down for approximately 25 minutes. This allowed the participants to give additional explanation of their perceptions, and to make verbal links between the concepts that they highlighted during the first phase of the research. The researcher made notes on these research conversations both during and

immediately after each seminar had ended, noting down some verbatim quotations from participants for use in the data analysis process.

Stage three consisted of in depth thematic analysis of the sticky notes, that were gathered by the researcher at the end of the session, and the notes made following the research conversations. This enabled the researcher to compare participants' perceptions to those of other studies exploring the TA role, better supporting conclusion-drawing. Coding of the data was undertaken manually, following the constant comparative approach of analysis. This method required repeated comparison and contrast of new codes, categories and concepts as they arose, until saturation was achieved (Denscombe, 2010).

Ethical considerations particular to this study

Consent from the participants was sought at the beginning of the seminars; the researcher articulated the aims of the study that was being undertaken and noted that no participant's data would be included unless they were willing to partake. Consent was assumed by participants handing their written sticky notes to the researcher at the end of the seminars, as clearly explained by the researcher in the sessions. All students willingly handed their notes to the researcher at the end of the session, therefore all students present at the seminars were assumed to consent to participate.

Prior to collecting data, the researcher considered the potential student to tutor power differential inherent in this study and acknowledged that some participants may have felt pressure to consent due to this imbalance in status. To mitigate this as far as possible, the researcher's email address was shared with the participants and all participants were notified that they could email to request their withdrawal from the study at any point before the work was published. Furthermore, the only contact between the researcher and participants was

during the seminars; no other work was conducted at the university by the researcher that academic year so there were not additional incentives for the students to take part. Consent was also sought from the Primary PGCE course manager at the university, with regard to conducing the study and naming the university in the write up. The researcher was guided throughout by paying due regard to the ethical processes of educational research as articulated by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), including anonymisation of any data that enabled identification of a specific school/participant.

Data presentation and discussion of results

The data collected in Stage 1 of the research comprised 238 unique responses in relation to the roles undertaken by TAs and the participants' perceptions of the TAs they had worked with during their training to date. These unique responses were sub-divided by the researcher into themes, using the research questions to guide thematic analysis; the data were continually revisited, alongside the data gathered from stage 2 of the study, until saturation point occurred and no new themes emerged (Denscombe, 2010). 218 of the participants' unique responses are captured by and shared via the figures presented later in this section.

Trainees' perceptions of TAs' roles and responsibilities

The data in relation to the first prompt to participants (presented again below) were analysed first.

1. Identify the roles/responsibilities that you have seen TAs undertake, or that you are aware of TAs undertaking in schools

In order to present the key themes to emerge in relation to the above research aim, the researcher devised a concept map (figure 2), displaying the range of responses gathered from the trainees. The thickness of the line joining two concepts represents the frequency of the response i.e. the thicker the line, the greater the number of responses linking the concepts displayed (Hay et al., 2008).

[Figure 2 here]

As depicted in figure 2, three over-arching themes of student perceptions in relation to the roles and responsibilities of support staff in mainstream primary schools have been identified, those relating to: administrative duties/resource preparation; TAs' pedagogical role and supporting students with needs relating to Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH). It is possible to link these themes with the findings of the large-scale Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) research project (Blatchford et al., 2008), which highlighted six categories of TA tasks in schools:-

1. Support for Teachers and/or the curriculum
2. Direct learning support for pupils
3. Direct pastoral support for pupils
4. Indirect support for pupils
5. Support for the school (administrative/communicative)
6. Support for the school (physical environment) (p.9).

The most populous theme from the research informing this paper is that relating to TAs' administrative duties/resource preparation, with 53 unique responses relating to this theme. This most directly links with number five of the six TA tasks in school, as identified by Blatchford et al. (2008).

Interestingly Blatchford's research highlighted that by far the greatest amount of TA time was spent on supporting pupils, an average of approximately 3.8 hours out of the 7.5 hours worked by TAs per day (ibid). This is consistent with other studies into the responsibilities of TAs (Collins & Simco, 2006; Farrell et al., 2010; Hancock & Collins, 2005). Yet, the ITT students involved in this study identified administrative duties/resource preparation most frequently. This is arguably a lower-order skill in the teaching and learning process, therefore does not conflict with the traditional pedagogical role of a teacher. Perhaps, as student teachers, a particular focus on ensuring preparation for the lessons that they are obligated to teach is a priority. Therefore, participants are perhaps noticing TAs' support with this aspect of the teaching and learning process more readily than the higher order skills that could be attributed to TAs' role (Nash & Norwich, 2009).

Participants' second most populous response, on identifying roles that could be attributed to pedagogy, (49 unique responses, as displayed in figure 2) requires the researcher to revisit a prominent debate within the wider literature exploring the role of TAs in the England, that of whether or not TAs can be accepted to undertake a pedagogical role. Of course, it is important to recognise that the participants involved in this study are not yet qualified teachers, therefore may not yet have considered the important distinction between pedagogy and teaching and, as such, may as yet be less able to articulate the difference between these concepts in relation to the role of TAs. However, many of the responses displayed in figure 2, linked to the 'pedagogical role' theme do suggest that the roles attributed to TAs, by the participants in this study, are believed to be pedagogical in nature.

Roles linked to marking and assessment of pupils' progress are traditionally linked to the pedagogical role undertaken by a teacher, as they involve making and justifying decisions related to the teaching and learning process. Additionally, participants' use of the term

'teaching partner' suggests that some trainees viewed the skills of TAs as on par with those of the teacher in the schools that they have taught, again reinforcing the perceived pedagogical role of TAs. Indeed, the discussions held in stage two of this research, via the research conversations, further highlighted that the trainees viewed many of the skills that they had attributed to the role of TAs as pedagogical, with one trainee articulating, "*the TA in my class uses her autonomy to make decisions about how to pitch the content she's delivering with small groups, just as the teacher in my class does.*" This finding is in conflict with many other research publications exploring teachers' perspectives on the role of TAs. Teachers generally view their role as professionally dissimilar to that of TAs; at a basic level Teachers often articulate that they have academic qualifications that should allow them to make educated pedagogical decisions and TAs do not (Blatchford et al., 2009). Indeed, TAs are often viewed, both in the UK and internationally, as para-professionals, which further depresses their status.

Perhaps the trainee status of the participants in this study could account for the emergence of the pedagogical link to the role of TAs; ITT trainees have perhaps not yet developed pedagogical skills themselves, therefore may be more likely than experienced teachers to view TAs as highly skilled members of staff, displaying skills linked to the pedagogical role that they themselves wish to possess at the end of their training. As Puttick (2018) highlighted, trainee teachers often view themselves as 'not knowers' and may view more experienced staff as 'knowers.' Nevertheless, this is a particularly significant finding with regards to devising effective ITT content; it is vital that the DFE clarify their position on the pedagogical nature of the TA role, so as to prevent 'role blurring' developing between trainee Teachers and TAs.

The third over-arching theme to have been identified with regard to participants' responses is that of 'supporting students with needs relating to SEMH.' As previously highlighted, the inextricable linkage between the role of TAs and children identified with SEND needs has been widely acknowledged for over 20 years. Indeed, the initial stimulus for the vast increase in the numbers of TAs employed in English schools was as a result of the rapid increase in the number of Statements of SEN awarded to pupils in mainstream schooling from 1998 (DFE, 2012). However, participants in this study have articulated very specific perceptions of the role of TAs in relation to supporting children with SEND: their ability to support children with particular needs in relation to SEMH. This very specific focus is interesting and can be linked to Blatchford et al.'s (2008) third TA task, that of 'direct pastoral support for pupils.'

The significant rise in the number of children being identified with SEMH needs is of particular focus in current English policy and practice and may be one reason behind participants' numerous responses on this issue (DFE, 2016b; National Health Service, 2018). Wide media coverage is likely to have resulted in SEMH needs being a prominent topic of discussion in their placement schools. However, participants' responses did not use topical terminology, such as 'mental health needs,' suggesting that their views were not solely shaped by popular discussion in the media or in schools. Instead, their responses focused on roles that TAs were perceived to undertake that could be directly related to supporting children displaying needs relating to SEMH. These included roles linked to behaviour management, managing feelings and supporting pupils with building independence skills. It seems that these areas of focus in the TA role are of prominent visibility for ITT trainees, which suggests that the proportion of TA-time allocated to supporting needs relating to SEMH is high. This links to prior research by Saddler (2015), whose doctoral research identified an effective focus for the TA role in implementing socially inclusive practices to better support pupils' social inclusion and, as a result, promote academic achievement. It

appears that TAs may be undertaking activity, either planned or autonomous, that supports students to build their social competence skills to better engage in the teaching and learning process and the high quality first teaching of the teacher in the classroom. It is suggested that more widespread research be conducted to ascertain the presence and characteristics of this role linked to TAs, so as to better inform both policy on the nature of the TA role itself and more effective ITT content in relation to supporting students identified with a SEMH need.

Trainees' perceptions on the impact of the role of TAs

In order to present the key themes to emerge in relation to the second research prompt (presented below), a second concept map has been devised by the researcher, labelled as figure 3. As with figure 2, the thickness of the line joining two concepts represents the frequency of the response.

2. Articulate your perceptions on the impact of the role of TAs, with regard to pupil outcomes and school effectiveness

[Figure 3 here]

As depicted in figure 3, four over-arching themes of student perceptions in relation to the TAs in mainstream primary schools have been identified, those relating to: supportive pastoral figure; multi-skilled/flexible approach to role; status (positive) and status (negative). The first finding of note in relation to this research question is that the overwhelming majority of the responses to this question were positive, highlighting that the majority of the participants involved in this study held positive views in relation to the role of TAs. This is heartening to note, as research and media coverage continues to present mixed perspectives

that often highlight negative perceptions of the role of TAs in English primary contexts (Webster & Blatchford, 2012).

The most prominent theme to emerge from the data gathered in response to the second research question is that of the supportive pastoral figure that TAs are deemed to represent for the participants. This is strongly linked to the third theme identified in response to research question 1, and depicted in figure 2, that of the role TAs are perceived to undertake in supporting students identified with SEMH needs. Clearly, activity undertaken by TAs in relation to supporting students to achieve social inclusion in the mainstream primary context is valued highly by ITT trainees.

This links with wider research exploring effective deployment of TAs, much of which has linked the TA role to improving inclusive classroom experiences for children identified with SEND (Benstead, 2019). However, there remains a disconnect between this highlighted focus in TAs' role and government policy, which remains focused on TAs' responsibilities associated with scaffolding the teaching and learning process more directly, for example by implementing intervention programmes or running SATs booster groups (DFE, 2019). This, therefore, has also led to a lack of guidance in ITT content on optimal deployment of TAs by teachers.

Of course, scaffolding direct teaching and learning is important, however, unless a child experiences social inclusion they are far less likely to be able to optimally engage in the teaching and learning activity that TAs support them with (Black-Hawkins, 2010). Therefore, a focus on the social dynamics of the learning environment is equally important. It appears that the pastoral role that is so highly valued by teaching staff and pupils remains under-recognised in political literature and wider research. It is vital that ITT core content be

reviewed to acknowledge this vital role and ensure trainee teachers are aware of the significant impact TAs can have on social inclusion.

The perceived flexibility in relation to TAs' role, as highlighted by the participants in this study, relates to widespread prior research acknowledging the numerous roles that TAs often undertake on a daily basis (Hancock at al., 2010). This also further highlights the complexity and difficulty in defining an effective focus for TAs' role and contributes to the aforementioned issues with role-blurring between the role of TAs and teachers. The terms 'flexible and adaptable' were frequently contributed by the participants in this study, with 9 unique responses linking to this theme. It is clear that, not only did the trainees recognise the multi-faceted nature of the TA role, they also spoke of this role as being undertaken willingly by the TAs that they had worked with. The terms 'open-minded' and 'responsive' further reinforce the positive view of this aspect of TAs role; articulating that TAs can' use their own initiative' also links back to the identification of pedagogy linked to the TA role. The research conversations highlighted that TAs, *'never complain about the fact that they're pulled here, there and everywhere'* and *'They are a jack of all trades but master of none and they don't seem to mind. If they're asked to move to another class at short notice they just get on with it.'* Of course, it should be recognised that these statements are not generalisable to the whole TA population, but they do indicate overwhelming positivity about the way in which TAs responded to the ever-changing nature of their role.

The positive regard in which the participants viewed TAs' flexibility also links to the third theme as depicted in figure 3, that of positive status. The terms 'invaluable' and 'invested' highlight the positive regard in which the majority of the participants held the TAs they had worked with. The term 'invaluable,' in particular, links with prior research into perceptions on the role of TAs; school-based education professionals have been found to often use this

terminology when describing the TAs that they work with (Moran & Abbott, 2002; Saddler, 2015). However, as has been previous explored in this paper, this highly positive view of TAs does not always link to wider research in to the efficacy of TAs in terms of improving pupil outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2009). Further research into exploring the juxtaposition between school-based professionals' views of the role of TAs and research highlighting inefficacy of TAs' deployment in terms of pupil outcomes is required, to unpick this inconsistency in understandings. Without this additional research, it is very difficult to devise effective ITT core content in relation to optimal working between TAs and teachers to improve pupil outcomes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, although the vast majority of participants' responses to research question two were positive, there were 11 unique responses that portrayed a more negative view of the role of TAs. Statements that TAs 'confuse children,' are 'disruptive to the learning environment' and are 'sarcastic towards children' indicate a lack of TA appropriate knowledge and skills to best support the teaching and learning process of the children they work with. Indeed, this assertion is evidenced by other responses under this theme, those of 'unqualified,' 'needs to take initiative' and 'needs more training.' This further reinforces the difficulty in conceptualising TAs' role as pedagogical or solely as supporting the teaching and learning process. It should be noted, however, that the sample size is small with this study, therefore perceptions of one or two participants have the potential to skew the results ascertained. Yet, the participants' acknowledgement that further training is required for TAs strongly links with prior research in this area (Butt & Lowe, 2012).

Conclusion

This research has highlighted that, despite the early stage of their career, Initial Teacher Trainees were able to highlight a wide range of roles/responsibilities and perspectives on the role of TAs in mainstream primary contexts. This suggests that the level of interaction/contact between TAs and trainees teachers is high, even at early stages of teacher training. Participants' perspectives reinforced much prior research concerning the difficulty in defining effective foci for TAs' roles, the lack of training that TAs are able to access and issues with role blurring between TAs and Teachers. Role blurring is particularly important to address, when devising effective ITT core content to support effective TA to teacher working. It is recommended that the government clearly set out distinctions between the responsibilities associated with the roles of teachers and TAs, so that trainee teachers can build optimal working relationships with support staff.

Participants' responses enabled a specific link to be made between the role of TAs and supporting children with needs relating to SEMH. This link highlights the perceived visibility of SEMH needs in mainstream primary contexts and provides a useful focus for future, wider scale research, into the focus and efficacy of TAs' role. It may be that TAs have a unique role to play in supporting students with skills linked to social inclusion, so as to better enable students to access the high quality teaching of the teacher and promote academic achievement. At a basic level, is clear that effective ITT content should make links between TAs' widely acknowledged pastoral role and the pedagogical role of the teacher, to ensure that optimal opportunities for pupils to be social included in the learning environment are afforded.

The prominence of the administrative duties and resource preparation role that TAs are acknowledged to undertake was clear in participants' responses. This is argued to be a lower

order skill in the teaching and learning process and was at odds with the much higher order skills that participants linked to the TA role, many of which could argued to be pedagogical. Clearly, there remains a lack of uncertainty about how to prioritise the varied and numerous responsibilities associated with TAs, which is a barrier to both determining and implementing effective ITT core content at policy level.

Central to this ongoing debate is the status of the TA role; it is vital that policy makers and practitioners determine how far the responsibilities of a TA can be deemed to pedagogical. If, as this research tentatively suggests, many elements of the TA role can be likened to the pedagogical role occupied by a teacher, then a radical reconceptualisation of the responsibilities, status and access to training that TAs currently experience is required. This should be reflected in ITT core content, so as to ensure that all trainee teachers understand the purpose of and responsibilities associated with the TA role and, therefore, avoid ineffective role blurring. Fundamentally, the overwhelmingly positive responses from the trainee teachers that participated in this study suggests that TAs continue to be highly valued by their colleagues, which is encouraging during a time of fiscal and structural uncertainty in the education sector.

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Figures

Figure 1: Stages of research

Stage 1: Concept Mapping

Stage 2: Research Conversations

Stage 3: Thematic Analysis

Figure 2: Concept map displaying trainees' identification of TAs' roles and responsibilities

Laminating

Dinner Lady

Displays

Lunchtime helper

Administrative duties/ resource preparation (53 responses)

Sticking things in books

Photocopying

Preparing resources

School trip adult

Odd-job helper

Playground duty

Dealing with emotional needs of children

Helping with independence

Supporting students with needs related to SEMH (17 responses)

Sensory circuits

Pastoral care

Behaviour management/ support

Crowd control

Teaching partner

Teaching phonics
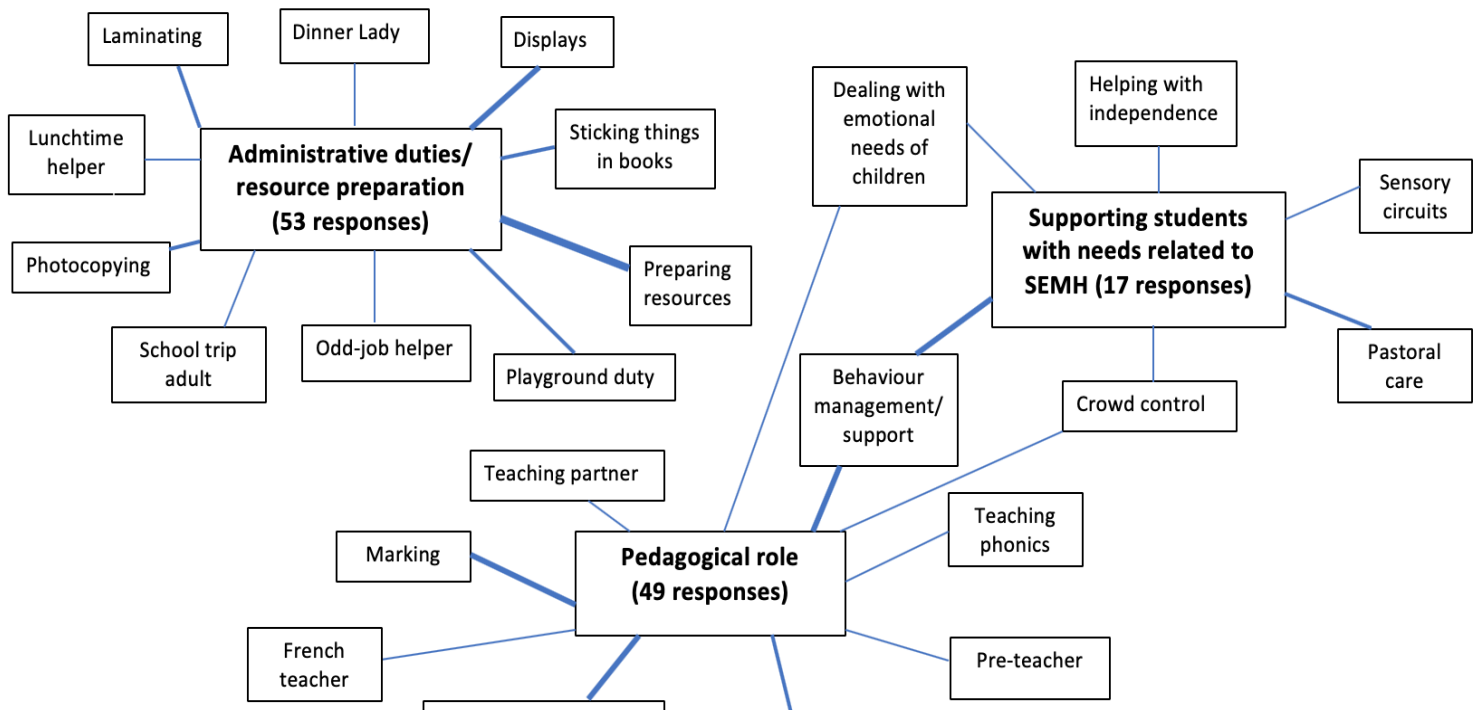
Marking

Pedagogical role (49 responses)

Pre-teacher

French teacher

Figure 3: Concept map displaying trainees' perceptions of TAs